

Prologue



The phone rang again.

Ted ignored it, fixing his attention on his reflection in the hall mirror. He swept his thick grey hair away from his face and ran a thin hand over the deep wrinkles on his brow. He wondered when he had started to look so old. Narrowing his eyes on the toast crumbs clinging to his uniform jumper, he brushed them off with a rough sweep before straightening his glasses on his crooked nose. He took a deep breath; he shouldn't keep the man waiting.

He reached out for the still ringing phone.

"Ted Riddlestone," he announced. "Yes sir. I know it's four o'clock. I'm leaving my house now, sir."

He hung up with a beleaguered sigh, buttoning up his thick woollen jacket and reaching for his keys. His fingers knocked against a battered metal lunchbox. There would be hell to pay if he forgot it, like the vitamins he'd almost neglected to take this morning. One missed day could be the death of him. Grabbing his lunchbox, he hurried out the front door without a backward glance.

A gust of frigid morning air swept over him. It was coming close to Christmas now. The weather was worse this year than it had been in a very long time. The chill seeped into his old bones, making him shiver.

He hated winter.

He paused on his gravel driveway, straining up to see the starry sky. That wasn't quite right. He was afraid of it.

There was a reason.

Every day in winter he travelled to work at this ungodly hour because he had a very important job to do. The mayor even called him daily with reminders to get there on time.

Ted frowned. He knew his job better than anyone. He might not like it, but he would damn well do it. He loved his town and he did his best to protect it.

Carwick was his life. It had been his family's life for generations. It was the ideal country town; quaint, picturesque, safe. No one ever had to venture into the noisy and polluted cities for anything. They even had a world-renowned university.

It was a town where old families lived and died. The residents were happy and the people never asked difficult questions. They had no reason to. Nothing was amiss in Carwick. It was perfect.

Ted heaved another sigh. It was his job to keep it that way.

The walk to work was short. Down several cobbled streets and he was in the centre of town, on the main road facing the town hall. The shops were still dark; streetlights flickered over the wooden signs above the doors. Milk cartons had been left on the step of the newsagent while the bookshop, Haven, had large delivery boxes piled up outside it.

Ted hurried past them drawing closer to the town hall. The large clock tower at its front dominated the Carwick skyline. He narrowed his eyes at it with a relieved whistle. He'd have plenty of time.

The imposing building was on a steep incline that forced all major roads towards it. It looked like a palace resting on an expanse of well-maintained gardens.

The age of the town hall was hard to place. People had built on top of it, adding and expanding. They never destroyed what had stood there before. That was because of what lay beneath the foundations.

Ted clutched his lunchbox tighter.

The windows on the lower levels were lit. The night-guards and a skeleton staff were already there. Their days also started early during winter.

The car park was dotted with expensive cars. Ted glared over at them. Some of the mayor's people flitted around the building, supervising him indirectly. He knew what they were doing, no matter how discreet they were.

He straightened up with a grim smile and quickened his pace up the wide steps to the main entrance. Huge granite pillars dwarfed him in their shadows.

Ted reached out to push the buzzer. Before he could, the door jerked open. The old, jowly night-guard stared at him. His cap had been tilted back on his head, showing his sweaty brow. Ted nodded, holding up his lunchbox. The guard rubbed his meaty hand over his chin.

“Good to see you, Mr Riddlestone.” He stepped back, the loose skin at his neck wobbled.

There was a wide entrance hall beyond him with giant decorated columns and a polished marble floor reflecting the glow from intricate golden lamps and the surveillance screens at the side. A dull drone from metal detectors filled the lifeless silence.

The guard tapped Ted on the arm with his baton, leading him forward. He walked over to a pretty woman scanning the monitors. He touched her hand and she turned, flicking her long auburn hair over her shoulder. The guard smiled, his stomach straining against his tight belt, a large roll of fat spilling out over it. His face looked like it had been drawn by a child; round, no chin, large ears. The only distinguishing part of him was his piercing eyes.

He was without a doubt, a very ugly man. Yet, when he caught the young woman's gaze, she lit up in appreciation. Ted paled, he hated when they did that, scrambling people's thoughts and feelings.

"Got to check your stuff, Mr Riddlestone," the guard told him. He glanced back with a meaningless smile. "Protocol."

Ted nodded. "Of course."

The guard pointed to one of the plastic trays on the conveyer belt. Ted dropped his things inside.

The lunchbox went in last, his hand hovering over the cool metal handle. Glancing back, he caught the man's clear eyes as the belt jerked forward, pulling the plastic tray into the scanner. The guard put his hand on the woman's shoulder. He started talking and her lips curled in an awed smile. Ted hurried through the metal detector. He looked back to see the woman laughing, oblivious to anything on the screen.

Ted collected his things, the old guard followed him.

"Everything's all in order, Mr Riddlestone." His eyes flashed, like a cat's lit in the headlights of a car.

Ted nodded and climbed the marble staircase. On the gallery, he paused to catch his breath. Stars swam across his vision. He wasn't as young as he used to be.

The ticking of a clock echoed down the corridor. The soft sound rang loud in his sensitive ears. He was attuned to it now. It seemed slower. He was running out of time.

He rushed down the hall to his office and fumbled with the door. He rammed it open with his shoulder. It bounced off the cardboard boxes behind it.

The ticking was loudest here.

His office was like a broom cupboard; small and enclosed. There was a damp smell of mildew and the floorboards creaked, bowing under his weight as if there was nothing to support them underneath. He rounded the table with his metal lunchbox and flipped a switch under his desk. There was metallic clicking behind him and a panel in the wooden floor slid open. Steel steps flicked out one at a time, leading down into the dark.

The ticking echoed up.

A stale draft swept over Ted. He pulled a torch out of his desk drawer and aimed it into the darkness with shaking hands. He clenched his teeth.

The steps creaked under him, it was a deafening racket. Ted could feel the oppressive weight of the town hall bearing down on him. He paused at the bottom and everything suddenly felt wrong. He listened and his eyes widened. Complete silence.

The ticking had stopped.

With his heart hammering in his chest; his breathing became laboured. Bright spots flashed across his vision. If he didn't try and calm down, he'd black out. He struggled to take a few steps; his legs trembling.

His torchlight darted across the cavernous space. Towering shells of red-brick buildings loomed out of the darkness. Their empty gaping windows seemed to lengthen as he stared at them. A worn road twisted away from him. Parts of the path had been cut through huge mounds of decaying wood, charred stone and rusted metal.

These were the remains of a city belonging to a now scattered race. He had never gotten used to the sight.

In the distance, he heard stones scrape against stones. Ted swallowed a mouthful of stale air.

"Breathe," he muttered to himself.

He swung his light. It bounced off a fallen wall and highlighted the mangled wheel of a bicycle. He thought he saw a shadow flittering past, but blinked, knowing there was no one else down here.

“There couldn’t be,” he whispered.

He twisted and raced down the dirt street. Above him, the cavern opened up to a great height. White quartz stone embedded in the grey ceiling gleamed back at him, while sharp pointed stalactites hung over his head like teeth in the mouth of a hidden beast. It was like a starless night above his head but this city had never seen the real sky.

Ted skidded to a halt.

A wide black oak grandfather clock towered in front of him. A figure had been chiselled into it; a snarling animal with human hands straining to escape. Roughly carved and splintering in places, it was fused to the ground in a mixture of stone and wood. Numerous white rocks encircled it in a symbolic ring of salt, old magic that was supposed to trap demons inside. Ted knew better. It was only the clock that had the power to do that. During winter, as it reached the solstice, the old prison grew weak. Only Ted and his people could maintain its power as it passed through the dangerous season.

However, the ticking had stopped.

And that meant...

He aimed the torch at the door. The metal lunchbox rattled in his hand.

The door creaked open. Ted felt sweat roll down his temples.

It was empty.

It was empty.

“Impossible.”

A shadow flickered by him. He kept his eyes on the swinging door. His legs shook. He didn't want to see. If he didn't look, it wasn't there. There was heavy breathing at his back; a growl reverberated through him. Flecks of spittle splattered against his neck. His hair stood on end.

"Impossible," he whispered.

The torchlight danced in a jerky pattern across the old wood. Another gust of warmth hit his ear, a snort followed by a terrible stench. The lunchbox in his hand dropped. It snapped open and his tools scattered.

He couldn't fix it now.

Not when *he* was free.

With a snarl, something slammed into Ted. He slapped to the ground. A bloodcurdling howl echoed throughout the cavern. Claws dug into his back, slicing through the muscles. A piercing scream ripped from his throat. Fangs nicked at his neck; the warm rush of blood blurred his vision and his head was yanked back. A wide jaw snapped down. His glasses flew off and skittered across the ground, blood splattering against the cracked lens.

Chapter 1



Temperance glared down at the thumbtack. It rolled away across the muted grey carpet and under a towering bookshelf. Flexing her stinging finger, she dragged the fairy lights across the book display. She tore off strips of masking tape and pressed them across the electric cord. The lights were crooked. They were already sagging down onto the bookshelf below as the tape started to peel away. She thumped it back in place. It would have to do, she was sick of injuring herself on the thumbtacks.

Behind her, her father pushed back his thinning blond hair before climbing up to squeeze his tall frame into the front window of the bookshop. He hummed as he propped a snowman up against a stack of books, then stepped back onto a rickety wooden stool, teetered and leapt down.

“Excellent teamwork, just like every other year!” he said, digging into a dilapidated box.

“Well not really, we’re earlier this year than usual,” she muttered.

“You heard Adora’s tarot prediction, the butchers will have a snowman on their canopy by tomorrow!” Pratchett gasped at her.

“Haven’s always the first with its decorations!”

Temperance pressed her lips together, wishing she hadn’t mentioned it. She’d never admit to either of her parents but she didn’t believe in her mother’s predictions.

Pratchett returned to his work. He ducked his head back through the cardboard flaps and hauled out more knotted ornaments. The corners of his blue eyes crinkled with delight. Temperance just stared at the jumbled mass. She jerked her thumb at a fake spider-web stuck across the corner of the stockroom door.

“Don’t you think that’s more for Halloween?”

“Not at all,” Pratchett grinned at her. “It’s for Boris! We can put his presents there!”

“Do spiders celebrate Christmas?” Temperance frowned.

“Oh yes!”

She hated when he talked seriously about Boris. He was, by her father’s own serious admission, a ghost spider. The ghostly aspect was convenient, she had to admit. It explained why no one else could see him.

“Have you taken your medication today?”

“Yes,” he muttered.

“Good.”

He avoided her eyes. Instead he stared at his knuckles as if something was scuttling along them. He lifted his fingers to the fake web.

“There now, Boris.”

With a sigh, Temperance reached for her jacket resting on the counter by the till. She bundled her small frame up for the cold weather, tucking her thick brown hair into the folds of her scarf, and tugged it up over her face until only her wide hazel eyes were visible. She inched towards the door. Her father trailed after her.

“Cyprian was in yesterday...”

Temperance stopped and glanced back with a scowl. She didn’t know why but she’d never liked Cyprian. “What did he want?”

“He said that his nephew, Alastair Byron, is coming to stay with him.”

Temperance rolled her eyes. “You’re only excited because you think he’s been on all these wonderful adventures while he’s been travelling abroad. You’re always dreaming of having a life-less-ordinary, but there’s nothing wrong with this one.”

She pointed her finger at her father. “Plus, all his globe-trotting means he obviously doesn’t have a stable job to speak of.”

“Don’t be silly, Temperance! Anyway, I’ve put mistletoe over the door in case he comes while you’re in the shop,” Pratchett wiggled his eyebrows at her.

“Sometimes I wonder what age you really are,” Temperance sighed.

She waved goodbye over her shoulder at her father.

“Ah, young love,” he sighed.

“I don’t even know him!” she said. “I’m warning you, don’t say anything embarrassing!”

“I only want the best for my girl,” he called after her. “You might see him today. He’s transferring to Carwick University. Think of all the adventures you two could have together!”

“Goodbye, Dad.”

Leaving him listing out exotic countries he thought had good adventure prospects, Temperance slipped away. The jingle of the shop’s bell rang out into the early morning air.

The town was quiet. A thin layer of frost covered the windscreens of the cars parked along the road. The metal shutters were still pulled down over the other shop fronts. Temperance nestled down into her scarf and hurried up the deserted street. The lamp lights were starting to turn off as the sun began to rise, casting a hazy glow over Carwick. The only people already at work were her father and the office workers in the town hall. Bright lights shone from the old building. One morning like this was enough to exhaust her for weeks; she didn’t envy them their early starts.

Temperance glanced back from the end of the road. Even though it had taken a few hours of work, it had been worth it. Her father was happy and Haven looked very festive with its artificial ivy and cotton wool snow.

As she turned the corner, a horrific sour smell hit her, like the putrid odour of an unwashed body mixed with stale mould. Lurching back with a gasp, she slid on a patch of ice near the gutters. A hand clamped onto her shoulder and stopped her fall. The stench got worse. An acidic wave of vomit-tinged hot breath hit her face. She strained away from it, pressing her sleeve over her nose and stumbling back.

A man was hunched over against the cold; his shredded clothes no protection against the weather. His skin was grey and lined with dirt. A long tangled beard and strands of greasy hair were plastered to his face. His eyes pierced through her and he shuffled closer. Another wave of his foul odour wafted over her. She gagged.

“Bloody hell...”

Temperance coughed and her eyes started to water. She stepped back and put up a hand to ward him off. She hadn’t thought he’d heard her, but he growled and stalked forward.

Temperance gritted her teeth, trying to stop from dry heaving. She threw up her fists, remembering what she could from the one self-defence class she’d ever attended.

The man froze.

He lifted his chin, sniffing the air. A strangled whine erupted from his throat. The hair on the back of Temperance’s neck stood up. With no warning, he loped back down the road and disappeared.

Temperance dropped her arms and rearranged her scarf, her fingers came away wet. When she brought them closer, she saw blood. She whipped the scarf off and threw it away in a panic. There was no telling what she could have caught from him. Her heart-spined up as she struggled to scrub her hands with a tissue. Biting her lip, she glanced down the way he had disappeared.

She wondered how badly hurt he was. Maybe that was why he had approached her; to get help. She could only hope that he would find it somewhere else. Taking a deep breath, she hitched up her bag and hurried away.

Chapter 2



The university campus was mostly deserted. A flock of birds pecking at the frozen ground scattered into flight when Temperance entered the square. There was only one other student nearby; he was cycling slowly ahead towards the sports hall. In front of the main buildings was a bronze statue of the college's founder with his stone wig covered in bird droppings. A few of the younger lecturers wandered past it with their leather briefcases, still lost in an early morning stupor.

Temperance strolled to the side of the square towards the administration offices. She already knew when she reached for the thick door knob, that they were closed. The grubby windows, half-blocked by stacks of paperwork, were dark. She jiggled the handle, before sagging back with a heavy sigh.

Her mother had signed her up for a class she wanted to drop. It started next term and she was dreading it. The bag hanging from her shoulder slipped to the ground. She pulled it back up with a dramatic huff.

She'd have to come back later.

To fill the time until they opened, she walked out of the courtyard through the large gatehouse to the small, grimy twenty-four hour shop.

It had a glass door with a loose pane that rattled when it opened and the filthy windows looked as if they'd been wiped with a dirty rag. A girl with red hair was flicking through a magazine at the old stained counter. There was a small fretwork tattoo at the base of her neck.

“Morning Temperance.” She gave a lazy salute without looking up. “You’re in early.”

“Morning.”

Temperance tried to discreetly catch a glimpse of the girl’s employee badge. Temperance came in almost every day and could never remember her name. The moment for asking it had long passed. Now, she just had to try and avoid using it.

She stopped at the coffee stand. A short man was still setting it up. He looked up at her and then flicked the machine on with a grunt. After a few minutes she had her hands around a warm plastic cup. She handed over the exact amount as a handful of coins. The man snorted, spilling the coins out on the table to count them. Temperance hovered near his shoulder, waiting for him to finish. With a sigh, he waved her off.

“See you again,” the girl at the counter murmured as Temperance left.

Her stroll back to the front square was uneventful. She slumped onto a cold bench near the statue. Something inside her bag rattled, she squeezed her eyes shut with a sigh. She shuffled up on the bench, digging into its side pouch.

Her eyes darted around as she dug out the plastic pillbox and tapped out two white tablets. She gulped them down with a swig of coffee. There was a rustle of leaves in a flowerbed beside her. She stuffed the box into her pocket.

“Hello dear!”

An old woman was in the bushes, waving a soil-caked trowel at her. Clumps of dirt tumbled off of it to land on her tartan jacket, while stray leaves snagged in her wiry grey hair.

“Professor Corliss.” Temperance smiled in greeting.

The woman was obscured and caught in place by an overgrown hedge but her eyes were darting around in excitement. “I have some interesting specimens for our class later.”

Temperance nodded politely.

That was another course her mother had signed her up for; plant toxicology. Adora had gotten swept up in the name, imagining potions, poisons and magic. Once she realised it was more scientific than that she had lost interest, but Temperance had been stuck doing it.

She wouldn’t let it happen again.

Someone dropped down into the seat beside her. She spilled her drink, shuffling away. She wiped at the splash mark and glared at the two empty benches across from her.

“Are you Temperance Levinthal?”

She glanced up. A dark-haired man she’d never met before was staring at her. His striking eyes were black. She blinked; he was very handsome with strong features and a shadow of stubble along his jaw. He shifted his elbows onto his knees and leaned forward. His fitted leather jacket creaked.

Temperance cleared her throat. “Yes?”

“I’m Alastair Byron.” He shot her a smile.

Temperance sat back and took a sip of coffee, staring openly at him. People didn’t just sit down and talk to her. It took her a second to notice his outstretched hand before she reached forward and shook it. His skin was warm next to her cold fingers. He had a strong grip. His palms were calloused, rough.

“We’ve never met,” she muttered.

“Your father gave Cyprion a picture. There were instructions on the back to give it to me.”

Temperance pursed her lips. She could only imagine what Pratchett had written. She gulped down the rest of her coffee.

Alastair studied her. “You’re not surprised. Did someone tell you I was coming?”

“Pratchett.” She tossed the empty cup into the bin.

“Would you like another drink?”

Temperance stretched out her cold arms. “No thanks. I’m just waiting for the administration offices to open. I can’t afford to miss them again. I want to drop a class.”

“What class?” Alastair produced a crumpled page from his pocket.

“Ancient magic and myths.” She blushed, it was embarrassing to even say it.

“I’m in that one. You don’t believe in magic? Vampires and werewolves?” he asked with a curious frown. “I thought it was popular these days.”

“I hate all that fantasy stuff. It’s more my mother’s thing.” Temperance gave a dismissive wave. “You know, mother spirits, earth goddesses, goat sacrifices, that sort of thing.”

“Goat sacrifices?”

“I’m joking,” she said in a dry voice. “I’m not very good at small talk.”

Alastair coughed and looked down. He folded away the timetable.

Temperance sighed and tried again. “You’re moving here for good?”

“I’m thinking about it,” he inhaled, his broad shoulders lifting. He settled back and folded his arms. “This is a trial. No one was supposed to know yet.”

“You can’t keep a secret in Carwick. Any news is gossip.”

“Is that right?” Alastair smirked.

Temperance shrugged. She felt him watching as she got up to check the administration office doors. They were still shut tight. She collapsed back onto the bench. It was freezing.

Alastair continued to stare at her. She struggled to say something. His eyes dropped to her open collar, she put a hand up to touch it.

He cleared his throat. "Stay in the class, Temperance, we can study together."

She bit her lip and swallowed. "Maybe."

"Good," he said, assuming she had agreed. Staring at him, she felt her heart sink. She didn't know what to say. He pressed his hands to his knees, about to stand up. "Then -"

A door slammed behind them.

Two men emerged from a side office that was connected to the main façade of the university's gatehouse, which was a tall imposing stone archway, hundreds of years old. The two of them were in the middle of an argument. Temperance easily recognised Cyprian Rothwell.

The other man had a trim beard and was dressed in a three-piece suit with a cane to match. He loomed over the much shorter Cyprian with a threatening expression.

"Sebastian Bloodworth," Temperance whispered. "What's he doing here?"

"The mayor?" Alastair asked, turning around.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "How'd you know that?"

"I have been here before." He pressed his knuckles against the bench until they were white. His eyes were riveted on the men.

Cyprian shook his head. Sebastian slammed his walking stick into the ground. Its capped silver end struck against the cobblestones. There was a tiny blue flare, like a match lighting. The stone beneath them seemed to tremble for a moment.

Temperance gasped. “Did you see...? Did you feel that?”

Her hand flexed, almost diving for her pills. Without thinking she grabbed Alastair’s arm instead. She jerked back with a yelp, receiving a sharp electric shock from his sleeve.

“No. I didn’t feel or see anything,” Alastair glared at her. His eyes seemed to gleam for a moment.

Temperance blinked; her imagination again. She drew away from him.

“Sorry.” She rubbed her hand with a frown, hoping she wasn’t ending up like her father. She glanced back at the two men. “I wonder why...”

Sebastian turned, like he knew they were there. Temperance sucked in a sharp breath. She met his cold eyes. It felt like she was pinned in place, being examined like a lab specimen.

The mayor said something. Cyprian glanced over at her. He strolled towards them while Sebastian disappeared through the main archway. She watched his approach. As usual, Cyprian was immaculately dressed, like a prim and proper country gentleman; however the image was ruined by his stocky build and unkempt shaggy hair.

When her father’s friend reached them, he wore a forced smile. He was still very pale. Temperance leaned back and crossed her arms.

“Is everything all right, Cyprian?” Alastair asked.

He stood up. Temperance hadn’t realised how tall he was. She watched their exchange. It was like a silent conversation was passing between them. Cyprian shot his nephew a warning frown.

“Of course,” he replied.

Her unexplained dislike of the man rose up. He was a good friend to her father. It was his only redeeming quality. She bent to pick up her bag, feeling a little hemmed in.

“Temperance, how have you been? I’m sure you were delighted to hear about our Alastair’s return.” The older man struggled to try and put an arm around Alastair’s shoulders. Failing to reach, he hung his arm in an awkward way almost like he was climbing him.

“I’m having a welcome dinner for him, I want you to come and stay the night. You can use the spare room.” He gave his nephew a sharp pat on the back.

Alastair’s expression darkened, he didn’t seem too pleased by the idea. Neither was Temperance. She trawled through her ready-made excuses to find an appropriate one.

She eyed Professor Corliss who was still digging in the cold soil.

“I don’t...”

“Ah!” Cyprian wagged his finger at her. “I don’t want to hear no. Alastair needs new friends in Carwick. And your father insisted you be his first! It’s a chance to escape your house tonight. Pratchett says it will be packed, isn’t there a get-together?”

Temperance cringed.

Her parents were having friends over for a winter solstice gathering. She didn’t think she could face another one of her mother’s versions of a Wiccan party. It would be crowded with menopausal women dancing naked around plastic cauldrons on the hill behind their house.

She sighed. “It’s true. I wouldn’t mind missing the jangling crystals and saggy bits this year.”

Cyprian hesitated then gave a sharp laugh. He slapped Alastair on the shoulder again, more forceful this time. “Good. It’s settled, see you tonight!”

He marched away. Alastair turned to follow him. He glanced over at her. “You’re so sweet and delicate looking. It’s a surprise you talk like that.”

Temperance blushed, she pulled at her sleeve. “Yes, well...”

There was a flash of amusement in Alastair's dark eyes. "I'll see you later."

He strode forward, catching up with his uncle in a few long steps.

Chapter 3



Temperance spent the day regretting her decision. After every lecture, she pulled out her mobile phone and tapped the screen. She wanted to call her father and reprimand him, but she didn't want to waste her money.

Her attention snapped back to the class when everyone started packing up their things. The lecturer adjusted his round glasses, pushing them up onto his balding head. He wished them a happy holiday and switched off his computer. As the rest of the class filed out, Temperance waited.

Professor Afton was a scatterbrain, he always forgot something. He picked up his laptop and hurried out of the room. Without missing a beat, Temperance gathered up his notes and hurried after him.

She couldn't help herself. She always felt the need to protect people like her parents; those who were a little eccentric or forgetful. Her brother, Crispin, was the complete opposite.

“Sir.”

He froze. Temperance smacked into his back. The notes flew out of her hands, fluttering across the floor.

“Oh dear!” He knelt to gather them.

Temperance grasped the nearest fallen journal. She flipped it over. The words were shimmering. There was a picture of complex gene sequences stacked together to create the face of a wolf.

“Decoding the werewolf genome?” she said, staring at the title.

Professor Afton snatched the journal away from her. “What?”

He gave a nervous laugh. He flipped it over for her to see again.

“Decoding the Neanderthal genome,” she read.

Her hands were sweaty. She studied the clear, bold letters; even the picture was different now; a heavy set humanoid face.

“Werewolf,” Professor Afton laughed again. He gathered up the rest of the pages. “Temperance you are too good to me; you always collect my things!”

Once they were finished, he cleared his throat. “How is your condition these days?”

Temperance’s eyes flicked to the journal and she thought of what she had seen with Alastair earlier. She needed to ask the doctors for stronger tablets.

Lately she *had* been seeing a lot more things; hallucinating. Her brother took the same medication but he never seemed to have any complaints. Not like her, always seeing things that weren’t there.

“I’m just tired,” she rubbed her eyes. She didn’t want to seem weak.

She knew mental health problems were taboo. She had felt the stigma since childhood; every time her father suffered a breakdown and had to be committed to the Candlewick Mill asylum.

She had been on medication her whole life. The condition was unexplained, some chemical imbalance in the brain. It had always been in the family. Her father didn’t talk about his mother but she had suffered from the same problems. She had died young after falling under a car while hallucinating she was being attacked by spirits. After that, a fatherless Pratchett had been adopted by his mother’s friends.

“I’m fine,” she insisted.

“Okay,” Professor Afton nodded after a short pause. “If there’s anything you need, just ask.”

Temperance clutched at her bag, watching him leave. She *had* seen it though. Blinking back her tears, she raced out of the building, elbowing her way past several students.

Storm clouds were gathering on the horizon. The first drop of rain splashed down onto her bare neck. She hurried out onto the street that would lead her home.

Her house stood on the edge of town, beside a large sprawling forest. It was an old renovated church, with a high steeple. A peaked hill behind it dwarfed their land in its shadow. It was particularly eerie in the dark. Adora Levinthal loved it. She told Temperance it called to her.

Temperance often wondered what the hill was saying to her mother. She was sure it wasn't 'get naked and dance on me'.

It was dark by the time she got to their gravel driveway, which was packed with different sized cars. Despite their earthy beliefs, the Wiccans all had one. The women were incredible at parking. Temperance had to squeeze her way between several bumpers to reach her front door.

The building was lit up from all angles. Her mother had placed candles on every sill and step. Temperance could see them glowing out past the coloured beads that dressed the windows. They were clearly a safety hazard, something only she ever seemed to think about.

Before she could slide the key into the lock, a flickering light off to one side caught her attention.

"She wouldn't have," she muttered, walking around to the side of the house.

Sure enough, her mother's battered greenhouse, full of all her flammable plants, was basking in the glow of at least ten large, unwatched candles.

Temperance pulled open the plate-glass door. A wave of cinnamon hit her, making her cringe. She pushed on inside, trying not to breathe in the scent of the candles as she blew them out. A rusted scissors lay abandoned beside her mother's more interesting herbs. Frowning, Temperance suspected Adora had made her 'special' brownies. Her mother's tarot cards were still spread out across her wrought-iron garden table; someone had been around today. People came to hear her tell their fortune. Adora marketed herself as a 'demister of the future'.

Temperance stacked up the cards, she never put any stock in Adora's occult obsessions, but technically only her mother was allowed to touch them.

Temperance froze when she heard a chorus of spine-tingling howls. The wild dogs in the forest beside them were very vocal tonight. The glass-house door creaked. She jolted around. A tiny mangy dog stared up at her. He sat down on the threshold and started to bite himself.

"Beast," she greeted, letting out a relieved sigh.

She finished tidying the cards away before nudging him towards the front door. She slipped inside. Her heart was still hammering in her chest. Beast snuffled at her ankles then disappeared into the sitting room.

Temperance stood in silence, wondering why the howling had frightened her so much. The presence of the dogs close to their house was nothing new. She dropped her keys onto the hall table as several of her mother's friends ambled out of the kitchen in a fit of giggles. They had bundles of clothes in their arms, which they added to a growing pile at the base of the stairs. A big wicker basket held their discarded underwear, socks and shoes.

The women were naked beneath thin chiffon robes, preparing themselves for the night ahead. They had tied up their greying hair, but she knew that it was left to flow free when the dancing started.

"Hello," she managed to choke out.

Over the years, age had caught up with the ladies. Temperance remembered a time when they were much younger and their antics had been highly anticipated by her brother's friends. Now, not even the Wiccans' husbands were interested.

"You should come with us this year, dear! It's about time!" someone called from inside the kitchen. Several of the women hummed in agreement, while the others busied themselves looking for the body-paints.

"No!" Temperance gasped, pushing her way into the kitchen.

Adora was at the table, scrubbing her hair in a huge wooden basin of rainwater. The room was heaving with sprigs of holly and ivy and the air was thick with the smell of baking brownies. Temperance narrowed her eyes at her mother.

"Special brownies?"

"Of course," Adora answered in a sing-song voice. She pulled her hair back and rung it out. "Your brother sent a postcard from the Amazon! He's been living in a tree for three weeks to stop the loggers!" She fisted her hand, throwing back her long greying hair. "Fight the good fight Crispin Raindrop Levinthal!"

The women tittered. Temperance cringed. She hated when her mother used their middle names.

"Oh, I do hope my little Temperance Moonbeam decides to follow in her big brother's footsteps!" She clasped her hands together.

Her robe moved slightly and Temperance looked away with red cheeks. It was a sight no daughter should have to see.

"You know he is a ruthless money hungry businessman in Asia, nowhere near the Amazon. The only interest he has in the environment is destroying it," Temperance pointed out.

Her mother was in denial.

“Don’t be silly Moonbeam, look at the postcard.” Adora breezed away from her and plucked up a card from the table.

This was the aspect of the situation that worried Temperance the most. Crispin was playing along and aiding Adora in maintaining her delusion.

Adora handed her the postcard. The picture was of a rainforest all right. She flipped it over and saw the stamp was Chinese. Temperance handed it back without reading it.

“Very good,” she said, averting her eyes as her mother twirled around the kitchen.

She slipped on a large pink oven mitt and lifted out the brownies. She set the tray down beside some crystals and herbs the Wiccans had woven into necklaces.

Temperance jumped forward as the door hit her back and a thin woman squeezed in.

“Oh sorry!”

“Professor Corliss, hello again.”

The professor was still wearing her tartan jacket and now had on a matching pair of trousers that had golden buttons down the sides, for easy removal.

“Hello from the both of us. I brought my cat this year,” the old woman exclaimed, setting the tabby down on the floor. When she stood up she was only a little taller than Temperance. “Old Chopsticks loves the solstice!”

Professor Corliss put a new set of body-paints on the table. “I bought these today. I think we used up the black paint during the summer dance?”

“I think you’re right Wilhelmina,” Adora exclaimed. She pointed at two huge, greasy glass jars. “I have the burning oils and the body butter.” Her fingers danced over the lids. She turned to Professor Corliss with a confused, dreamy smile. “I forget which is which.”

Temperance glared at her. She could just imagine the Wiccans smearing the oils over themselves and getting too close to the massive bonfire they burned on the hill.

The colourful beads hanging in the sitting room doorway swung and clicked together. Pratchett stuck his head around.

Temperance could hear a group of men beyond sobbing.

“Any tea dear?”

Adora started cutting into the brownie tray. She waved her knife at the stove where a metal kettle was steaming away.

They were a strange looking pair. Pratchett was far taller for a start, easily over six foot. While Adora was like Temperance; a small doll of a woman. Though, Temperance was petite in almost every way, whereas Adora was voluptuous. She looked like her Wiccan images of the earth mother. However, for all their physical differences, both her father and mother had very similar personalities. They were children in heart and mind. They had never had parents of their own. It explained their eccentricities when it came to raising Crispin and her.

Adora had grown up with distant relatives after her own parents had passed away. Once she had been old enough, she'd left to live off the land and start her tarot card reading business, which had subsequently failed. She'd met Pratchett at nineteen and became pregnant with Crispin.

That was when life as Temperance now knew it began.

There was a ten year gap between herself and her brother. Temperance wished her late arrival had matured her parents, but if anything they'd taken it as an excuse to remain children for longer.

“Did you meet Alastair Byron?” Pratchett asked in an offhand way, pouring out several cups of tea.

“Are you and the rest of the Wiccan husbands watching girly movies in there?” Temperance countered. One of his blubbering friends cried out for tissues. It was their ritual to watch romance movies, whilst their wives went to dance. Age and disinterest had caught up with them all.

Pratchett reached for a box of tissues and some biscuits. He arranged them on a tray.

“He is handsome, isn’t he?” he pressed.

Adora’s ears pricked up and she edged closer. Professor Corliss looked interested now too. She kept arranging and rearranging the body-paints on the table. Several more women filed in.

“Did we hear handsome?” one asked.

“Is Alastair Byron your boyfriend now, Temperance?”

Pratchett’s eyes sparkled with hope. He nodded as if trying to influence her answer.

“No,” Temperance replied. Her father’s face crumpled.

More women crowded into the kitchen. They started disrobing. Temperance tried to look away but no matter where she turned she saw something she didn’t want to. They lifted their hems and began to paint their flabby legs. The younger ones were helping the older ones who couldn’t reach. The lewd comments started as some of the bolder ones began with their chests.

“Oh? I’ve heard Cyprian’s nephew is very handsome,” a woman in front of Temperance said. “My daughter Abigail would be perfect for him! She’s a model, you know.”

“No!” Pratchett leapt forward. He nudged the woman out of the way and grabbed Temperance by the shoulders. He pushed her forward into a ring of now half-naked, half-painted women.

“Look at her, she’s so beautiful! She could have any man!”

A small squeak escaped from Temperance as someone stepped up behind her. She felt a breast at her back and tried to squirm away.

The women cooed in agreement.

“Temperance, you’re so pretty!”

“Like a little china doll!”

“Stop!” She grabbed her father’s arm and dragged him out into the hall.

“Temperance,” he said in a serious voice. “I think you should stake your claim before he starts college. I’ve seen Abigail; she’s not as pretty as you, but you can’t be too careful. Do it tonight!”

“Are you mad sending your daughter to your friend’s house to stay overnight?” she hissed.

“It’ll be good for you to chat to Alastair. I thought it would be the perfect getaway. And you know your mother likes to party until dawn. This year you won’t have to watch the rebirth of the sun ceremony. I know how uncomfortable it makes you!”

Temperance shuddered at the thought of *that* ritual. It was the worst part. She licked her lips and glanced away from him.

“Fine.”

The doorbell rang and Pratchett jumped away to answer it.

“Oh!” he shuffled back to allow the person in.

Temperance paled. Alastair stood in the doorway. There was a frown on his face, his eyes landed on her and narrowed. He twisted his keys and tilted them at her father. “I came to give Temperance a lift to Cyprian’s house. He noticed it was raining.”

The kitchen door squeaked and Temperance winced.

“Who is it dear?” her mother asked.

Alastair stepped up to offer her his hand. “Alastair Byron.”

Temperance’s eyes followed him, trying to gauge his reaction to

her mother's transparent chiffon robe and dripping hair. He made no visible sign that he noticed. Even the several half-naked women behind her didn't draw any response from him. He nodded in greeting; his depthless black eyes captivating them.

Pratchett pulled at Temperance's sleeve. She looked up at him.

"Make a claim!" he pleaded.

She shrugged off his hold with a sigh. "I'll be back in a minute."

She disappeared upstairs to collect her things. Her clothes were neatly organised, folded and waiting to be put away on her bed where she had left them. She pulled out a simple pair of pyjamas and reached into her bag for her pillbox.

She refilled it enough to last a few days. It saved on time. She squeezed the box tight in her hand until it ached. Taking a deep breath, she put it into her bag. It was clear the medication needed to be stronger. She would have to bring it up at her next appointment.

When she reappeared in the hall, Alastair was surrounded by Wiccans. Temperance slowed on the final few steps.

He was smiling, humouring them. But, flickering beneath his calm, confident exterior, she could finally see he was uncomfortable. His worn boots scuffed along the rug as Adora attempted to drag him into the kitchen. Temperance frowned; Pratchett was helping to bump him along.

"We should go. It's getting late," she said. "And you two have a winter solstice to enjoy." Her eyes narrowed on her parents. They looked crestfallen. Adora was the first to release Alastair. She ushered the ladies back into the kitchen.

"Mother Earth requires full body-paint, we don't have much time! We are running late!"

The other women gasped their agreement, realising the time. Temperance watched them go. Pratchett still held Alastair's arm.

“Where was the last place you visited?” her father asked in a childlike voice. He coughed and added in a more confident way. “I visited Cornwall last year. Well, me and the wife – we went to a pagan festival!”

“I think it must have been tracking through the Far East,” Alastair said. “I had some things to deal with there at the time.”

“Such an exciting life for one so young,” Pratchett gaped at him. “What age are you now?”

“Dad!” Temperance hissed.

“Twenty-four,” he replied after a moment, as if having to give it serious thought.

“Don’t forget to blow out the candles when she leaves!” Temperance warned Pratchett.

Her father stood to attention. “I will get my men on it straight away!”

“Goodbye, Wiccans!” Temperance called, hopping off the stairs.

Adora stuck her head out of the kitchen again. She glanced at Alastair then skipped over to Temperance. She handed her a biscuit tin.

“In case you get hungry. I loved these when I was your age!”

Temperance drummed her fingers along the tin. She locked eyes with her mother. Adora gave a nervous giggle. She clapped her hands and popped back into the kitchen. Temperance heard the thunderous laughter coming from inside. Her fingers gripped the tin tighter.

She grabbed Alastair’s arm pushing him towards the door. It was like trying to move a lead weight. She felt the muscles in his arm flex.

Temperance waved to her father as the door swung closed behind them.

Alastair glared down at her until she lifted her hand away. The charming smile evaporated. He stalked off ahead of her.

She released a calming breath. It was going to be a long night.

Chapter 4



Temperance drummed her fingers over the biscuit tin as Alastair turned the car out of the driveway.

“Careful,” she remarked, watching the wing mirror inch past a stone pillar at the exit. “You could scrape it.”

She started beating her fingers a little faster against the tin, her eyes trained on the dashboard of the car. The interior was old. It looked like something from the seventies. She blinked, noticing there wasn’t even a radio.

Alastair growled deep in his throat. “Could you stop doing that?”

He stared down at her drumming fingers. She froze and slid her hand away. “Did you just growl?”

“No.”

They continued down the country lane in silence. It was unbearable. Temperance watched him out of the corner of her eye. He kept glancing out of her side window, studying the forest. Maybe he was wondering what lived in there. People from outside of Carwick always did. It was the odd noises; they were never sure what to make of them.

“Did you hear the wild dogs earlier?” she asked. “They’ve been quite restless.”

The car slowed.

Temperance pressed back against the door. She lifted her tin almost like a shield. Alastair leaned in closer. Keeping one hand on the steering wheel he stretched the other across her. This close, she could smell his aftershave. It wasn't like any cologne or lotion she'd smelt before, but it was familiar. She lowered the brownies to breathe it in. He smelt like the woods.

He froze in front of her. His eyes darted to her face. Temperance's cheeks flushed red and she pulled back. Alastair pressed down the lock on her door. Howling erupted from beyond the trees lining the road. Temperance shivered.

The sound was almost mournful tonight.

Alastair gripped the steering wheel tighter, his nails dug into the rubber lining. They stayed there for a few tense minutes, but nothing emerged from the undergrowth.

It was too dark and rainy to see anything anyway.

He cleared his throat and slid back into his seat as if nothing had happened. "It's safer to lock the doors this time of night."

Temperance frowned, wondering what he had been waiting for.

He shoved the gearstick into place and revved the accelerator. The car shot forward. Something bolted out of the forest. Alastair swerved and slammed on the brakes. Temperance jerked against the seatbelt. Only his arm stopped her from hitting the old dashboard. She winced and leaned back against the headrest, brushing her hair away from her face.

The windscreen wipers swished back and forth, clearing the rain; beyond them, a huge dog rose up, illuminated by the harsh glare of the headlights. Water dripped down off its muzzle. Its fur was plastered to its hulking body. In the lamplight, the dog's fangs gleamed, sharp and deadly. It snarled at them.

"It's like it's glaring at us!" she whispered.

Alastair fumbled to unfasten his seatbelt. The animal leapt off the road, its tail whipping at the undergrowth before it disappeared back into the woods.

“I almost hit it.” He sounded disappointed.

Temperance stared at him. She started drumming her fingers angrily on the tin, doing the only thing she could think of to irritate him. Alastair ignored her. He jerked the car back onto the right side of the road. They drove on in silence.

“They’re vermin,” he muttered. Temperance stopped beating the tin.

“No they’re not,” she shot back, staring out the window. “They’ve always lived in there. I’ve been here my whole life and I’ve only seen them a handful of times. I’m surprised you think that way considering so much of Cyprian’s work involves researching them.”

Alastair didn’t reply to her, but she felt the car speed up.

As they approached Cyprian’s house, the lights shone out onto the road. It was one of the most impressive buildings Temperance knew of. At one time it had been an old mill for drying hops but it had been remodelled so extensively that now only the exterior hinted at its past. A huge glass panel in the back of the house had the open plan sitting room overlooking the forest.

The oldest part of the building was a large circular kiln. It was where Cyprian had his private study. Once when she’d been very young, Temperance visited him with her father. The door had been ajar, so, curious, she’d snuck inside. There were shelves stretching up into the eaves, weighted down by dusty old books and occult artefacts. Cyprian’s interests were similar to her mother’s though she would never have guessed it.

In a shower of gravel, Alastair parked outside the front door. Not waiting to be told, Temperance got out. In the lights coming from the porch, she could see how old and battered the car actually was. She watched Alastair strain over the seats to reach the back windows. He leapt out and slammed the door closed.

“It doesn’t have central locking,” he said.

“I noticed. It’s probably too old for that.”

He stared at her as if trying to decide if that was an insult. He jerked a thumb at the front door. It swung open and Cyprian waved out at them.

“Come in. The food’s on the table!”

Embarrassed, Temperance leapt away from Alastair into the long hallway. It had been years since she’d been in Cyprian’s house. There were photographs lining the walls now; all in matching oak frames. They were nothing like Adora’s mismatched collection, many of which had been supplemented with handmade felt flowers. Cyprian’s home was stylish. He had a great sense of taste. He liked good food and wine, fine cigars and music. He was a man who wielded his intellect. Temperance often felt ignorant in his presence.

Nearing the end of the hall, one old photograph caught her attention. It was a black and white picture, yellowed at the edges. The subject was a tall man in an old-fashioned suit with side burns and a cane.

She pointed it out.

“He looks like Alastair.”

“Yes, an ancestor of ours,” Cyprian said in a brisk tone. “Alastair has a very common appearance though; people are always telling me he looks like someone else.”

Temperance raised an eyebrow at him. Alastair was anything but common. His height alone was memorable.

Beside the photograph of Alastair's double was an unframed painting. It was of a woman perched on a rigid wooden chair, her black hair shining in the sun. Her eyes were distant, like she was lost in a sad memory. While there was nothing particularly special about the image, it was still intriguing.

"My sister, Alastair's mother," Cyprian said.

Temperance nodded. She never knew what had happened to her. When Cyprian's eyes flicked to the picture however, an angry expression crossed his face.

He shot her a strained smile and nudged her forward. Alastair marched past to the kitchen counter, switching the garden lights on to highlight the roll of flawless lawn outside.

Then the phone rang. Cyprian glanced at his watch with a curse. "Alastair, dish up some food for Temperance."

He disappeared into his study. Alastair watched him go, reaching out to spoon some vegetables onto the empty plates. Temperance edged her way over to the table. She lowered her bag to the ground and hid the biscuit tin on the seat beside her.

"You aren't going to share them?" Alastair asked, without looking up.

"No," Temperance said. The evening would be bad enough without her mother's brownies.

Cyprian reappeared with his coat in his hands. Alastair dropped the spoon with a clatter. Several peas tumbled to the floor.

"Study," he told his nephew. "Now."

Temperance half stood up. "Should I leave?"

"No!" Cyprian shouted. She fell back into her chair, it rocked under the force. He took a deep breath. "Sorry. No, Temperance, we'll only be a minute."

Alastair's lips thinned. She watched them go before creeping around the corner towards the kiln. Cyprian's study was shut tight, but she could hear the two of them arguing. The light seeped out from underneath the door.

"Shut up, Alastair!"

Temperance pulled away, back into the shadows.

"Are you going hunting?" Alastair asked.

"No, I'm not. I just have some business to attend to. I want you to keep an eye on the girl. *That's* your job now. Do you understand?"

Temperance clenched her fists, nails biting into her palms. That was no one's job. She could look after herself.

"Downgraded to babysitter?" Alastair snarled. "I'm wasting my time! If this has something to do with Sebastian, then let me go with you."

"It has nothing to do with him."

"Then you *are* hunting. I saw them out tonight you know. We can catch them if we leave now..." he said slowly.

"Alastair, I know all about them. That's nothing new," Cyprian snapped.

Temperance heard the floorboards squeak. Someone was walking over to the door. She scurried back down the hall and skidded back into place as Alastair stormed into the room.

"Everything all right?" she asked, munching on a carrot.

Alastair's expression was contorted into an irritated scowl. He dropped down into the chair opposite her. Cyprian reappeared with his long coat buttoned up.

"I have an urgent matter to attend to, Temperance. Alastair will keep you company for the night. Don't go outside. The weather is forecast to be very stormy, it won't be safe."

Temperance smiled over at Cyprian, nodded then glanced back at Alastair. He was hunched over, his dark eyes fixed on his plate. He tore at a chicken leg, ripping it into tiny pieces with his fingers. She grimaced.

“I’ll see you later,” Cyprian called.

Alastair waited until the door was shut. “This is your fault,” he snapped, pointing a greasy finger at her.

“What is?” she asked, with an innocent look.

Alastair rolled his shoulders and a muscle twitched in his neck. Temperance put down her knife and fork and then stepped away from the table, having had enough of his attitude already.

“Fine, I’ll go.”

She headed straight for the backdoor that led out into the garden.

Alastair shot after her. She felt his breath hot on her neck. When she reached for the handle, he yanked her back, spinning her around until she smacked up against the door.

“Don’t go outside,” he warned.

Something sparked between them, like it had on the college bench. It sent a shockwave through Temperance’s arm and she jerked away with a yelp. Alastair dropped his hold.

“It’s dangerous.”

He turned, avoiding her eyes.

Temperance rubbed her arm. She stayed huddled by the door and watched him return to his seat. The thought crossed her mind that she should sneak away somehow. As she was debating what to do, Alastair grabbed the biscuit tin. She didn’t get a chance to stop him before he stuffed one of the brownies into his mouth. Temperance vaulted over. She whipped the tin out of his hands.

“Get away from them!”

He stared up at her with wide dark eyes, crumbs tumbling out of the corners of his mouth. He swallowed and leaned back in his chair, allowing her to pull away from him.

“You shouldn’t have eaten that,” Temperance muttered, fastening the lid with an angry slap.

Taking a deep breath she sat down and fixed her eyes on her dinner. It wasn’t long before the herbs began to affect him.

He started to chuckle.

“I warned you,” she dropped her fork.

“I feel a lot better though,” he smiled.

He hooked his finger at her. When she didn’t move, he tilted his head, urging her forward. Frowning, she leaned in.

“What?”

“You’re very nice to look at, Temperance Levinthal,” he told her, with a wide smile, “Temperance is tempting me and that’s a very bad idea; you should be careful.”

She felt her mouth dry up. “Why?”

“Aren’t you afraid?” he chuckled, rolling his lip beneath his teeth.

“Not really.”

“You should be,” he warned.

His hand shot out around her head, pulling her face towards his. He would have kissed her had she not reacted straightaway. She punched him, hard.

He jerked back, gripping his face. The actual force of the hit had not affected him at all. It was sheer amazement that had him tilting back in his chair.

The shock seemed to clear his head. His dark eyes sharpened. It was like the herbs were leaving his system, having only affected him for a few minutes.

“I think I’ll go to bed,” she said, pushing away from the table.

“First door on the right,” Alastair muttered through his fingers.

Temperance snatched up her things then hurried up the stairs without looking back. She closed the door behind her and slid onto the hard wooden floor. The room was sparse and decorated in Cyprian's minimalist style; pale magnolia walls, a small chest of drawers and a single bed at the centre.

She crawled over to it and lay down on the pillows, not bothering to undress. She couldn't understand why she'd been invited to the meal in the first place. She stared up at the stars through a vaulted skylight above her head. The sooner she slept, the sooner the night would be over. Yawning, she decided she was going to have a very long conversation with her father tomorrow.

On the edge of her dreams, she thought she heard someone arguing downstairs. A door slammed and there was silence. She drifted away convinced it must have been Cyprian.

At least he was back now.

It felt like only a few seconds later when someone was shaking her awake.

It was still dark outside.

"Temperance," Alastair hissed.

She lurched upright, pulling away from him. He moved back with her, his hands still on her shoulders. She pushed him, forcing him to let go.

"What?" she snapped.

"We have to leave."

Her bag was slung over his shoulder. Temperance was about to ask him what was going on, when he tilted his head to one side. A chorus of horrific, bloodcurdling howls cut through the night.

Temperance clapped her hands over her ears to block out the chilling sound. It was like it was coming from inside the house. Alastair wrapped his arms around her, pulling her out of bed.

“Let me go!” she shouted. She thumped his chest in a panic. She might as well have been hitting a brick wall. All she was doing was hurting herself.

Alastair scooped her up and carried her down the stairs. She cringed; he was cold and damp, like he’d been outside in the rain. His grip tightened when he reached the final step.

A blast of cold air hit her. Temperance squirmed around to see the huge plate glass window overlooking Cyprian’s garden was gone. It lay shattered in pieces across the floor. She gasped. She hadn’t heard the massive thing fall.

The garden lights had been switched off and outside she could hear loud growling. The sound echoed around them, amplified by the cavernous room. Numerous tiny shards of glass glittered on the floor. Large jagged pieces of the window had been harpooned into the lawn. Dark shapes slipped through the shadows.

Alastair set her down. “Stand still, Temperance.”

He pulled out a knife from a leather belt at his waist.

Temperance stumbled back away from it. A bolt of lightning flashed outside in the darkness. It lit the room. She could see the couch had been shredded. The table and chairs where they’d had their dinner were splintered apart.

Deep thunder erupted above them.

She twisted, muffling a yelp into her sleeve. Alastair’s clothes were stained red.

Swallowing her scream, she looked down; it had transferred onto her. With a shaking hand, she pressed her palm to her chest, pulling it back with a hiccupping gasp. Blood; she fisted her hand around it.

“Cyprian!” she screamed.

Where was Cyprian?

She bolted away from Alastair, towards the study.

“Cyprian!” she screamed again, her voice hoarse. Adrenaline

flooded her body. She sprinted ahead of Alastair.

“Don’t!” he shouted after her.

But she was already inside. “Cyprian!”

Alastair grabbed her from behind, but he couldn’t stop her from seeing.

His uncle lay crumpled on the study floor, the thick carpet beneath him saturated with his blood. His arms were slashed as if he had fought off his attacker; one with claws and sharp fangs. There was blood splattered across his wooden desk and the books lining the shelves.

Temperance gagged.

“Don’t look,” Alastair pleaded. But his voice was shaking. He was in shock. She didn’t know now if he was talking to her or to himself. “Don’t look...”

Temperance felt dizzy, disorientated. Her eyes darted around the room.

Ominous words had been painted across the walls in Cyprian’s blood.

‘Tick-Tock, Tick-Tock.’

More howling echoed around them. The smell of death was stirring them into a frenzy.

Alastair tightened his hold, with a firm jerk he turned her around. His face was white and strained, “If you want to survive the night – *run!*”

